Santa Clara County Flora and Fauna

Trees of Santa Clara Valley

By Albert E. Johansson

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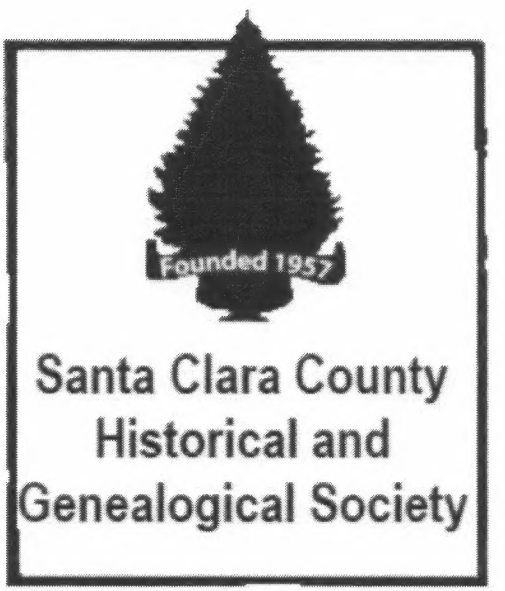
Circa 1936

Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara County Historical and Genealogical Society



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CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

The west side of the Santa Clara Valley is solidly wooded. In the valley itself the growth is more sparse. The eastern foothills, though more densely treed than the valley, are not so thickly wooded as the Santa Cruz Mountains toward the sea.

At least seven species of oak flourish here. First, is the Valley Oak, notorious because its roots are often infected by a fungus which transfers itself to fruit trees planted on newly deforested ground. Second, is the Blue Oak, the heart of which is often so hard that it will turn the edge of an axe. Then, there is the Maul Oak, curious because it is subject to infection by at least fifty-four species of oak gall. It has strong, tough, and close-grained wood, which has been used for mauls, wagon parts, and tool handles. Fourth, is the Coast Live Oak. This was first discovered by the Malaspina Expedition, the only scientific group sent out by the Spanish Government to investigate the shores of Alta-California. Branches have been cut from this tree for fodder to save cattle from starvation in drought years. The Interior Live Oak is next, which grows in inland valleys. Then, we have the Black Oak, and after that the Tan Oak, which in the past has furn-

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

ished tannage for fine, heavy leathers. The half-inch bark used to be taken off in four foot lengths called "rims".

The Redwood (Sequoia sempevirens) is found in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The age of these trees is from 500 to 1400 years. They reach a height of 340 feet. The wood and the bark are unusually fine and rot-resistant to an extraordinary extent. Unusual among cone-bearers, they generally reproduce by crown-sprouts. Lumber from this wood has been extensively used in California. The purposes to which it has been put include building lumber, railroad ties, piles, and poles. At one time the redwoods of the county, and of California, were threatened with destruction, and it is a curious truth that one of the first to advocate their conservation was a member of the Imperial Council for India, Sir Dietrich Brandis. At least one of the local redwoods has an historical significance. This is the Palo Alto (tall tree). It is situated on Highway 101, where San Francisquito Creek crosses it about 20 miles north of San Jose at the town which takes its name from the stout old redwood.

Box Elder and the Big Leaf Maple, whose twigs were anciently used by some Indians as a medicine

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

to bring riches, occur here.

The Yellow, the Red, and the Arroyo Willow grow in the county. Owing to their profuseness in the southern part of the pueblo of San Jose, Willow Street and Willow Glen take their names from them.

Digger Pine grows in the Mt. Hamilton range. Its seeds were eaten by the Indians, (called Diggers by the whites), and these people also ate the green cones. Yellow Pine and Douglas Fir, a lumber tree, are found in the same range.

White Alder can be seen along the foothill streams.

The Black Walnut, which, in its natural state, occurs only in infrequent California Indian camp sites, is cultivated in this county to make a stock graft for the commercial English Walnut, making the latter more resistant to disease and climate.

The California Laurel is locally used in cabinet work. It is usually seen in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where it is a tree from 25 to 100 feet high. In some other localities it appears as a shrub, scaling no more than 20 feet, base to crest.

The Western Sycamore is best visited in old

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

river bottoms and stream borders. It often marks the courses of vanished rivers, and is one of the most common trees of this vicinity.

The California Buckeye grows on dry hills, canyon walls, and gulleys around the valley. It also borders streams.

A curious tree is the Madrona, or Madrone. Bret Harte called it - "Captain of the Western wood,
Thou that apest Robin Hood",
and made reference to its red under-bark. It is, despite its strange beauty, of no use except for firewood.

Numerous household remedies have been distilled, or brewed, from the bark, leaves, flower, and fruit of the Blue Elder. Birds are fond of its fruit and distribute its seeds widely. For this reason it is most commonly found along fences, where the feathered ones, or, at least some of them, love to perch.

The Blue Gum, or Eucalyptus, is an importation from Australia. Usually planted as a wind break, or shade tree, its wood has been used as an interior trim, and is a common fuel in some localities.

Among other importations may be mentioned the Acacia, Elm, European Sycamore, and Australian Bottle-tree.

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

The California Nutmeg is a comparatively uncommon tree, though not truly rare; is found here in the vicinity of Stevens Creek Park. Otherwise there are no known growths peculiar to this county.

No lumbering to amount to anything is done in Santa Clara County.

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THE AMPHIBIANS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

The Amphibians of Santa Clara County are, in comparison with eastern and northern areas, comparatively scarce. But, still it has some species of interest, and one of these at least must command the interest of the natives of Louisiana and the rest of the world, - this animal being the California Red-legged Frog, whose nether limbs are said to be better food than those sold in New Orleans.

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE AMPHIBIANS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(Continued)

There are more than two salamanders to be found in the Santa Clara Valley, but two, at least, are fairly easy to find. The first of these is the Pacific Coast Newt, called "water dog" by school boys. It is found in mountain streams and pools, and in the damp forests that surround these places. Its young are gilled and carnivorous; the adult can breathe the air of the atmosphere, and is also carnivorous.

The Tree Salamander derives its name from its habit of living in cavities of old oaks, and in caves dug under the fallen branches of the same tree. Black, with yellow dots, it is easily recognized. Its food is fungus and insects. Somewhat smaller than the Pacific Coast Newt, it reaches six inches in length.

The common toads of this valley are few. First among these is the Pacific Tree Toad, whose song of two notes, "crack-it, crack-it", is familiar to most children. The tadpoles of this toad eat algae and decaying material, but the adult is a true friend of the farmer, for he takes unto himself the flies and the parasitic insects that come his way. Coupled to his toes are sucking disks that enable him to climb a vertical glass plate without the least

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

difficulty. His maximum length is one and three-quarters inches. The second toad of importance in the valley is the California Road. Not by any means peculiar to the district between the Santa Cruz and Mt. Hamilton ranges, it is found from San Diego to Washington but, due to its prevalence in the New Albion of Sir Francis Drake, it has been called the California Toad. It eats insects, sow-bugs, and worms. Needing moisture as much as its kindred do, its custom is to make a burrow in the ground - deeper in winter than in summer. Its song is a series of high-pitched notes which no one has been able to transcribe.

And of the frogs: The only one that we can ascribe with justice to the Santa Clara Valley is the California Red-leg Frog. It can easily be recognized. Swimming or diving, the upper parts of its body are a mottled brown, and the lower abdomen and the under part of its legs are red. Reaching a length of six inches it has no fear of small fish. In fact it often gobbles them up. It also eats the young of its own species. Popular report says that this frog sets an example for cannibalism that the rest of the group have still to achieve. But it has one quaint habit which is interesting, and that is

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

THE TREES OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

this: Like the Australian, the New Zealand, and the African lung-fish, it hibernates in the mud of dried-out pools during the hot season. It has not the vocal powers of its cousins, and its only audible reaction to any stimulus, including actual physical pinching, is a low-pitched croak.